

Why Do You Look for the Living Among the Dead?

Romans 5:20-6:7 & 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-20

¹On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" ⁶He is not here; he has risen! - Luke 24:1-6a

The most important event in the history of the world was the cross and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I know that sounds like two events, but to me, one seems to lose something without the other. Without a cross, there is no divine forgiveness of sins, and without the Resurrection, there is no basis for hoping that God's forgiveness means anything in terms of eternity, for if at death, I simply cease to exist, does it really matter if I cease to exist in my sin or cleansed from sin? Jesus' bodily resurrection proves to me that God really does have power to give to me new life, both now and into eternity.

Most of you don't need resurrection preached at you. You believe it already. Instead, we will explore Jesus' resurrection as our source of power to be more than we are, to say "No!" to temptation and to be lifted above crippling emotions like guilt, anger, lust or sorrow that cause us to be less for Christ than we should be. Jesus' Resurrection is God's supreme declaration of His power to break the cords of sin. We believe that. How do we apply that belief so as to shake off sin's residual baggage?

I know God's grace covers me, but I do so weary of the struggle against temptation. I tire of falling. But, I also know that I am not alone in the struggle. The Apostle wrote about his own such dilemma:

²¹So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²²For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ our Lord! - Romans 7:21-25

Two-thousand years ago, an empty tomb answered Paul's question, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" At that tomb, a different question was posed to a handful of frightened woman: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Christ was no longer in the grave and by the same power that raised him, we have been declared free from sin. Still, we struggle to live sin-free. Like Paul, we resist a "body of death". Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised in power to destroy the work of the devil, but the evidences of devilish power remains all around us. Let us work today on transforming our thinking so that we might find power to cease living among the dead.

I. We Have Nothing in Common with the Sinful Dead Romans 5:20-6:7

A. All People are Sinners in Need of Divine Grace

In Romans 1, Paul developed how all men had sinned against what could be known about God simply through what He had created. In chapter 2, he showed how the Jews, in spite of their access to God's Law, were sinners because they disregarded that Law. His point: "... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). That means that all people need the grace of God. Grace means that He forgives us according to His undeserved mercy and not because of anything we do. This grace is received by faith, but this good news is easily twisted. Many believe that if they merely agree to certain things about Jesus, they are saved. No hatred of sin, love of holiness or repentance unto change is required. This is a man-made standard for faith that will never save anyone.

Many professed believers today live with a cavalier attitude about sin. They trade on grace. They have found it easy to believe certain biblical teachings about free forgiveness and why Jesus died, and they equate that "easy belief" with faith, but it is not faith. Biblical faith repents. Biblical faith runs to God in trust and obedience. They need to heed everything Paul had to say on these matters.

²⁰The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, ²¹so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ²By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. ⁶For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin - ⁷because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. - Romans 5:20-6:7

B. We Were Freed *FROM* Sin, Not *TO* Sin

In a cartoon depicting two couples seated in a living room engaged in Bible study, one of the women says, "I haven't actually died to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once." Dead to sin seems a bit more demanding than that. God is holy. Sin kept us at a distance from Him. Would Jesus die so that we might feel safe in doing the same things that kept us from God in the first place? No, Jesus died so that we might be freed from sin to pursue righteousness. We trivialize these Passion events when we act as if our sin does not matter. That completely misses the point of why Christ came.

Paul directed his readers to recall their baptisms. This expression of faith that Christ Himself ordained paints a visual picture that identifies a believer with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus by immersing that person into a watery grave, illustrating a burial to the old life, only to be raised to a new life. The imagery must have been crystal clear once Paul spelled it out to His readers. Paul wanted them to think of their initial coming to Christ as the point when they died to sin.

C. A Sin-filled Life Continues to be a Powerless Life

A young boy was explaining basic Christian Theology to his younger sister: "You see, it was Jesus' job to die for our sins; it's our job to sin." Unfortunately, that seems to be the same grasp of theology embraced by many who should know better. We are dead to sin in a spiritual sense. God views us as if we were righteous like Jesus. But, while we are dead to sin in a spiritual sense, sin is not dead to us in a practical sense. The devil still moves around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Anyone who claims to be without sin deceives himself. We still war against sin.

Sometimes, the Bible presents sin as willful rebellion against God. Other times, sin is described as bondage that we are powerless to break. Sinners are both transgressors and victims, and that's important to concede if we wish to be of any mutual value to one another in battling sin. Those who effortlessly control certain vices can grow piously intolerant of those given to more compulsive expressions of sin, yet it is lost on them that the harshness that inevitably goes hand in hand with self-attained piety is completely foreign to the demeanor of Christ toward sinners and is therefore, sin in its own right. On the other hand, too much emphasis on the compulsive or addictive nature of sin is all the excuse others need to divest themselves of any personal responsibility for the things they do.

No wonder Christianity has always battled and still battles two extreme heresies. One is "works salvation" - the notion that God accepts us based on things we do. The other is "easy-believism" - the notion that if we affirm on a solely intellectual level that Jesus claims are true, such "belief" will save us. Both extremes ignore the true nature of sin as well as the urgency of pursuing righteousness.

D. Is There Something In Between "Easy Believism" and "Works Salvation"?

The simple answer to that simple question is, "Yes! There is. The truth lies between the two extremes. Christianity is clearly a marriage of our will and the divine. We must apply ourselves to the pursuit of holiness. God's grace does not absolve us of our responsibility for willful sin. Our salvation is not something we can ever accomplish without God's grace. And, God certainly can save us without our participation, but nowhere can I find in Scripture that He intends to.

²²You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. - Ephesians 4:22-24

Ephesians 6:9 says, "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." "Schemes" means "strategies" or "calculated ploys". What you believe about the nature of the conflict will determine whether you even take up God's armor. If you have concluded that you are so helpless against sin that you can never stand, then you have been taken in by a calculated ploy to blind you to the strength available to you that was proven by the resurrection of Jesus. If, on the other hand, you believe that your continued willful sin is irrelevant because God's grace covers you, based on the shallowest conceivable level of belief, then you also have been blinded by a different calculated ploy that implies that God is unable to detect unrepentant hearts.

In any event, apply yourself to godliness, with *ALL* of your strength because that is the right thing to do, but not in your own strength *ALONE* for that would be a futile thing to do. Call on God's power demonstrated when Jesus triumphed over the grave. Flee sin, pursue righteousness and trust Jesus for it is inappropriate that the redeemed of God should be found "living among the dead."

II. We Have Nothing in Common with the Hopeless Dead 1 Corinthians 15:1-8; 12-20

A. There Is an Unbreakable Link between Christ's Bodily Resurrection and Our Eternal Hope

Amazingly, some professed believers today suggest that the idea of Jesus' resurrection simply means that He continues to be alive in the hearts of people who remember His words and duplicate His kind deeds, but that He did not literally rise from the dead. Such drivel is no longer Christianity at all. It reduces the faith to ethical, benevolent and social institutionalism. There can be nothing uniquely hopeful pertaining to a life beyond this one, because God has yet to prove that He can defeat death.

Someone in Corinth was teaching that dead bodies do not come back to life. While they may have acknowledged a “new kind of life” for those who studied Jesus’ teaching, they could not envision a life that could overcome physical death. Dead bodies don’t come back to life they argued. Most Grecian thought about afterlife concluded that the soul would eternally be separated from the physical body and reabsorbed into the cosmos, with or without any unique identity or consciousness of their own. This was as odds with Christianity, which taught of a resurrection of the physical body.

B. Paul’s First Thrust Was to Reestablish the Centrality of Jesus’ Resurrection

To Paul, this categorical assertion in Corinth that our dead bodies do not raise back to life stripped the Resurrection of Jesus of its unique purpose, which was to demonstrate God’s power over sin and death. If we all die and stay dead, then what was the real point of Jesus’ resurrection? Was it a mere freak event? If we insist that dead bodies do not rise again, then there is no reason to cling to the belief that Jesus’ dead body rose again. Of course, Jesus’ resurrection was very hard to argue with by anyone in that day who professed to be a disciple of Jesus, because it would mean calling all those who established the early church “liars”, because they founded the faith on the very premise of Jesus’ resurrection. Paul wrote:

¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. – 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

The Corinthians became Christians based on the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Knowing that his audience would be reluctant to question Jesus’ resurrection, Paul pounced on them. “Okay, if you concede that bodily resurrection from the dead happened once, even once, then you have already undercut the teaching of some that dead bodies do not come back to life. Jesus came to life, and it is essential to your eternal hope to know what that has to do with what will happen to you when you die.”

C. Paul’s Contention Was that without Resurrection, There Is No Good News

¹²But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

²⁰But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. – 1 Corinthians 15:12-23

From the bumper-sticker file: "I have a new philosophy. I'm only going to dread one day at a time." Without the hope of resurrection secured by Christ's own Resurrection, Christianity breaks down. Dreading the future is all that makes sense. No matter how ethical a belief system, no matter how many hungry people are fed or how many orphans are cared for, No matter how much stress is alleviated from our lives or how much our marriages are strengthened, Christianity falters if it is not grounded in hope. The church could never have survived for two-thousand years without the certain hope of eternal life. No man can live a life of contentment if the answers to the other side of the grave are not resolved. The bodily resurrection of Jesus secures the resolution to such questions.

So, let us live according to our calling in the living Jesus; "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Ephesians 5:14). Let us cease living like those who are dead in sin and hopelessness. How might we honor the risen Christ on this day that we have set apart to rivet our attention on His resurrection? We could sing about it. Done that. I could preach about it. Done that. One additional suggestion: With Paul we can endeavor to "know Christ in the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:10). How? We commit ourselves to prayer, to His word and to the Spirit fellowship of His people. That's how our living Savior has provided for us, that through these things we might appropriate resurrection power for our personal struggles against sin now and hopelessness into eternity.

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